

# WILSON'S STORM-PETRELS, SHEARWATERS AND OTHER SEABIRDS IN THE GULF OF ADEN & INDIAN OCEAN

BY

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I have been greatly interested in Mr. C. A. Gibson-Hill's papers and Mr. Bryson's letter (*J.B.N.H.S.* Vol. 48. No. 2) on Wilson's Storm Petrel, and other oceanic birds in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean.

On two recent voyages, I have kept very careful notes of the birds seen at sea between Colombo and Aden. These observations are, I think, not without interest as they show very clearly the changes in distribution that take place in some of our oceanic forms in the summer and in the winter months. The homeward voyage, 11th to 19th July (1949) was chiefly remarkable for the large numbers of Wilson's Petrels in the Gulf of Aden and an interesting flight of Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) on the 18th July, while the outward voyage, from 13th to 19th January (1950) for the complete absence of any kind of petrel and the scarcity of shearwaters. Presumably, the petrels and many of the shearwaters had migrated and were in their breeding haunts in the Southern Hemisphere in January. It would certainly appear probable that, as Mr. Bryson suggests, the Wilson's Petrels that he saw in the Cape Guardafui area on 21st November, 1945 were gathering before proceeding south.

The following are extracts from my diaries of the two voyages.

M. V. 'WORCESTERSHIRE. *Homeward voyage. July, 11th to 19th 1949.*

Speed normally approximately 14 knots, reduced at times to 9 knots owing to head-winds in Indian Ocean.

*July 11th 1949. Indian Ocean.* Sailed from Colombo at 2.30 p.m. Immediately after leaving harbour, a single Large Crested Sea Tern (*Sterna bergii velox*) crossed our bows flying south. These terns are now nesting in large numbers on a rocky islet about 60 miles south of Colombo.

While still within sight of Colombo we passed a single, small, white-rumped blackish petrel flying close above the water—most probably a Wilson's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*); also 12 to 18 medium sized shearwaters—dark chocolate brown above and very little lighter below; darker on the primaries when seen in a good light but most of them were some distance away, flying close over the water, wheeling occasionally and moving in open order in a scattered flock.

They appeared to be the Wedge-tailed or Green-billed Shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*) but might possibly have been the Pale-footed Shearwaters (*Puffinus carneipes*).

*July 12th 1949. Indian Ocean.* Sea moderately rough; wind strong, from S. W. 9.00 a.m. A single shearwater crossed our bows—almost certainly a Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

9.30 a.m. Three Shearwaters (Wedge-tailed) passing flying southwards.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $7^{\circ} 17'$  N., LONG.  $75^{\circ} 18'$  E.

2.05 p.m. A single shearwater (same species); 3.45 p.m. another shearwater (same species) flying south-west at very much the same speed as the ship. I was very surprised to see so many shearwaters off Colombo, early in July.

July 13th. *Indian Ocean*. Sea moderate, wind strong. No birds seen.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $7^{\circ} 22'$  N., LONG.  $70^{\circ} 04'$  E.

July 14th. *Indian Ocean*. Sea moderate, slightly choppy with a long swell. 11.30 a.m. Two shearwaters off the starboard side.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $7^{\circ} 18'$  N., LONG.  $64^{\circ} 37'$  E.

Between 1.45 and 2.00 p.m. two more shearwaters were seen, one flying within 200 yards of the ship. It then moved further out and was joined by several more which gradually dropped astern; one was seen to settle for about a minute. The one that came close was almost certainly a Wedge-tailed Shearwater; at 6.15 p.m. another one was seen.

July 15th. *Indian Ocean*. Sea moderate, with increased wind and swell. 7.28 a.m. A single shearwater (Wedge-tailed) on starboard bow. 9.10 a.m. another single shearwater.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $7^{\circ} 17'$  N., LONG.  $59^{\circ} 28'$  E. Afternoon; sea subsiding slightly. No birds seen.

July 16th. *Indian Ocean*. Sea moderately rough, wind W.S.W. No birds seen.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $7^{\circ} 30'$  N., LONG.  $54^{\circ} 48'$  E.

July 17th. *Indian Ocean*. Strong westerly wind; sea moderately rough.

6.30 a.m. Three Dusky Shearwaters (*Puffinus assimilis*) flying low to starboard, one settled on water for a few seconds. 7.35 a.m. Two more Dusky Shearwaters flying at a short distance from the ship; they fly like Wedge-tailed Shearwaters but with more flapping and more wheeling, showing first the dark brown of the upper plumage and then the white of the lower. 8.43 a.m.: Another Dusky Shearwater. Ship is now about 90 miles east of the African coast. 10.20 a.m.: Flock of 8 to 12 Dusky Shearwaters, wheeling and flapping occasionally; one settled on the water for a few seconds. One larger, dark shearwater, further away appeared to be a Wedge-tailed Shearwater. 11.15 a.m.: A single shearwater (Wedge-tailed) crossed our bows flying west.

11.30 to 11.50 a.m. Several Dusky Shearwaters seen, two couples and a single bird, all flying west.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $9^{\circ} 59'$  N., LONG.  $52^{\circ} 12'$  E. 1.00 p.m. Single Dusky Shearwater. 3.00 p.m.: We are now passing Ras Hafum at about 6 miles distance.

3.30 p.m. Many Dusky Shearwaters, flying in various directions. 3 Red-billed Tropic-birds (*Phaëthon aethereus*), distinguished by their red beaks, black-barred upper plumage and long white tails passed the ship; one flew high near by and the other two kept more or less together. Dusky Shearwaters numerous, flying singly or in small open-order flocks. 4.30 p.m.: Two or three single Dusky Shearwaters, wheeling at a little distance from the ship. No more birds seen. At about 9.30 p.m. we turned into the Gulf of Aden, passing Cape Guardafui light.

July 18th. *Gulf of Aden*. About 40 to 50 miles off N. coast of Somaliland. Wind slight; slight swell. 5.30 a.m.: Wilson's Storm Petrels have reappeared; passed about 12 flying low over the water, close to the ship, also two Red-billed Tropic-birds. Between 7 and 7.30 a.m. we passed into calm waters; Wilson's Storm-Petrels very numerous indeed; many settled on the water, others flying close above; several hundreds could be seen on both sides of the ship. It would appear that these petrels had collected in this more or less calm area for good feeding and were then resting. 7.30 a.m.: One Wedge-tailed Shearwater and very many Wilson's Storm-Petrels. One Aden Sooty Gull (*Larus hemprichi*) accompanied the ship for about 10 minutes hanging above our stern; it then settled on the water and drifted astern. 7.45 a.m. passed two Wedge-tailed Shearwaters flying and one Blue-faced Booby (*Sula dactylatra*) on the water.

7.50 a.m. Three Brown-winged Terns (*Sterna anaetheta*) flew past flying east low over the water, together with several Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. Between 8.30 and 8.45 a.m.: One Wilson's Storm Petrel and two Brown-winged Terns were passing and two Aden Sooty Gulls were following the ship. 9.00 a.m.: Several Wedge-tailed Shearwaters were seen at little distance away and one Wilson's Storm Petrel, but bird life is now scarce again. 10.38 a.m.: 2 large terns, blackish upper plumage, white lower—similar to (but considerably darker than) Brown-winged Terns, passed the ship; they appear to be Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*). No other birds seen before noon.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT. 12° 04' N., LONG. 48° 12' E. 1.10 p.m.: Two shearwaters appeared, they are slightly lighter chocolate brown in colour and slightly larger in size than Wedge-tailed Shearwaters; they may have been Pale-footed Shearwaters (*Puffinus carneipes*). One Wilson's Storm-Petrel was also passed, 3.30 to 4.45 p.m. Large numbers of Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*) flying low over the water, came up from far out to the east and crossed our bows in a steady stream of small flocks flying in open order. Many hundreds must have passed us, all flying in the same direction i.e. south-west towards the Somaliland coast. I have never before seen such a remarkable flight of birds at sea. Several Wilson's Storm Petrels were also passed but they were not flying with the terns. There was, however, an occasional Brown-winged Tern (smaller and browner) flying with the Sooty Terns. The flight of Sooty Terns continued until after 5.00 p.m., gradually tailing off. An occasional flock of 7 or 8 Sooty Terns mostly flying in couples, continued to pass until about

5.45 p.m., but none was seen after that time. A few Wilson's Storm Petrels were seen up to about 6.00 p.m. when the light became too poor to see.

July 19th. *Gulf of Aden to Red Sea.* Sea smooth; 5.15 to 5.30 a.m.: Very large numbers of Wilson's Storm Petrels, many settled on the water, gradually became fewer until the last was seen about 6.00 a.m. Many of these petrels appeared to be in moult with ragged plumage. 6.10 a.m.: Three Aden Gulls were overtaken flying in the same direction in which we were heading; after remaining with us for 10 minutes or so they dropped astern.

6.25 a.m. to 8.00 a.m.: A large falcon joined the ship and 4 Brown Boobies (*Sula leucogastra*) were passed, one of which was sitting on the water. Just before passing through the Straits of Babel Mandib, a large flock of terns with grey mantles, black caps and orange-red beaks was passed, many of them were diving down after small fish; they appeared to be the lesser Crested Sea-Tern (*Sterna bengalensis*) but I could not be sure of their identification. Several Wilson's Storm Petrels were also passed.

At 8.00 a.m. we sighted land to starboard and commenced to pass through the Straits of Babel Mandib and into the Red Sea.

M. V. 'WORCESTERSHIRE': *Outward Voyage: January 13th to 20th 1950.*

January 13th 1950. *Gulf of Aden. Approaching Aden Harbour.* Sea calm but considerable ripple; sky overcast and cloudy; land visible 10 to 12 miles to port.

6.10 a.m. to 7.30 a.m.: No petrels; Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*), Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and Aden Sooty Gulls (*Larus hemprichi*) met us in increasing numbers as we approached Aden Harbour. In harbour, several Large Crested Sea Terns (*Sterna bergii*) were noted, together with many Aden Gulls and Black-headed Gulls (*Larus ridibundus*) and lesser numbers of Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. 4.30 p.m. to dark: Leaving Aden Harbour only the four species of gulls, seen in the harbour, were noted together with a few Large Crested Sea Terns.

January 14th 1950. *Gulf of Aden.* Sea smooth with a slight swell and ripple; weather clear and cool. 6.30 to 6.45: No birds. 6.45 a.m.: A small dark shearwater crossed our bows flying rapidly with rather quick wing beats but the light was not good enough for identification. Then 4 small shearwaters, dark brown above and whitish below, flew close over the water nearby. One settled and the others continued flying quickly and gliding occasionally, rather faster than the ship and disappeared ahead; they appeared to be Dusky Shearwaters. 7.20 a.m. Two Tropic-birds passed over and circled near the ship, they had red beaks, white wings with black wing-tips, long white tail feathers—probably the Red-billed Tropic-bird. 8.10 a.m.: Two very small birds, with whitish underparts, flying close above the sea appeared to be phalaropes—probably *P. lobatus*. At 11.15 a.m. two more phalaropes flying a little distance away on the same course as the ship. Just before midday two medium sized shearwaters, dusky chocolate brown above and a little lighter on the

under plumage, with rather longish wedge-shaped tails, passed—probably Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $12^{\circ} 14'$  N., LONG.  $48^{\circ} 04'$  E. 12.30 to 4.00 p.m.: Four Wedge-tailed Shearwaters flying singly were passed and a single gull, which appeared to be immature Herring Gull, followed in our wake. 4.30 to 4.45 p.m.: Several parties of phalaropes, flying rapidly close over the water in different directions were passed. One party was seen to settle on the water. At 5.18 p.m. when we were about  $8\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Ras al Fil or Ras Filuk on the Somaliland coast, two dark brown skuas, of medium size, were observed flying together and chasing one another. One of them came closer and flew in our wake for a few minutes together with the immature Herring Gull, it appeared to be a Pomatorhine Skua (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) but identification was not certain as it was too far away.

January 15th 1950. Gulf of Aden. Sea calm with a slight ripple and swell; weather bright and clear.

6.15 a.m. Two dark chocolate-brown, medium sized shearwaters (probably *Puffinus pacificus*), crossed our bows in the direction of Socotra and the Brothers Islands, which were just visible about 15 miles away, northwards. One Tropic-bird (*P. lepturus*) passed flying some 50 feet above the sea. 9.15 a.m.: A single Brown Booby (*Sula leucogastra* probably) flew past, flying westwards about 50 to 60 feet above the sea.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $11^{\circ} 29'$  N., LONG.  $54^{\circ} 42'$  E. No other birds seen.

January 16th 1950. Indian Ocean. Sea smooth with slight ripple; weather clear and sunny.

7.15 a.m. Three tropic-birds appeared, flying more or less together. Some black on the back and mantle but tails rather short. One settled on water and dived several times. 9.20 a.m.: Another tropic-bird appeared and flew round and over the ship for over 10 minutes. Beak yellow, black line below eye, wing tips black, some brown on the mantle and short tail—apparently an immature bird. It flew mostly about 50 feet up and was seen to dive into the sea, several times. It disappeared completely beneath the surface when it dived. No birds of any other species seen.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $10^{\circ} 30'$  N., LONG.  $60^{\circ} 01'$  E. No birds seen during the afternoon but at 5.45 p.m. a single tropic-bird appeared flying high round and above the ship for over 5 minutes. Several times it passed quite close. It had a short tail, yellow beak, black tips to the primaries and much brown on the upper plumage; it appeared to be a White-tailed Tropic-bird (*Phaëthon lepturus*). No other birds seen.

January 17th 1950. Indian Ocean. Sea smooth with slight ripple and swell; weather bright and clear. No birds.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $9^{\circ} 33'$  N., LONG.  $65^{\circ} 24'$  E.: Afternoon and evening no birds seen.

January 18th 1950. *Indian Ocean*. Sea smooth, with slight ripple and swell; weather clear and bright.

9.23 a.m. A tropic-bird passed flying and circling high over the sea; long white tail with a little black on the upper plumage—a Red-billed Tropic-bird. No other birds seen during the morning.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $8^{\circ} 48'$  N., LONG.  $70^{\circ} 39'$  E.: About 4.30 p.m.: Two unidentified birds reported. No other birds seen. Passed Minicoy Island Light about 11 p.m.

January 19th 1950. *Indian Ocean*. Sea smooth, with very slight ripple and swell; clear and sunny. No birds.

12 NOON: SHIP'S POSITION LAT.  $7^{\circ} 38'$  N., LONG.  $76^{\circ} 03'$  E.: No birds seen this day.

January 20th 1950. Arrived Colombo Harbour soon after dawn. Many Terns and Brown-headed Gulls in Harbour.

#### REFERENCES

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Gibson-Hill, C. A. (1950): Tropic-birds occurring in the Indian Ocean and adjacent Seas. *ibid.*, **49** (1): 66.